DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 034 SP 036 752

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TITLE Quality and the Self-Study Perspective on Research.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Evaluation Criteria; Higher Education; *Participatory Research; Qualitative Research; *Reflective Teaching; Research Design; Research Methodology; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); Teacher Education; *Teacher Improvement; Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Special Interest Groups; Teacher Researchers

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the value of the self-study perspective and discusses quality factors in self-study research by educators. The context of the paper is the experience of the Self Study of Teacher Education Practices (SSTEP) special interest group. Reasons for increasing interest in self-study among teachers and teacher educators include its significant impact on practice as other teachers become interested, its recognition of a range of perspectives and values, and its potential as a source of new knowledge. Quality in self study seems to be linked to a willingness to make aspects of the study problematic and an openness to a changed perspective. Also important in effective self-study is collaboration with others and outcomes that promote dialogue. Finally, the personal development of the individual is an important outcome of self study as beliefs and then practices actively change. With quality self-study research, this methodology will be increasingly accepted as a valid form of research. (Contains five references.) (ND)

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ED 397 034

QUALITY AND THE SELF-STUDY PERSPECTIVE ON RESEARCH

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Paper presented at a Symposium

"Is it navel gazing or the real fruit? Examining the appeal of self-study."

The annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association

held in New York April 8-12 1996

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SP036752

"But, is this research?"

The question is inevitable and it has come 30 minutes into the interview. Two reviewers representing the Australian Research Council (ARC) have been discussing the achievements in the first of a three year research project with Ian and Judie Mitchell and myself. The project has been funded to promote and disseminate teacher research and has been titled PAVOT (Perspectives and Voice of Teachers). The reviewers have been impressed with the teacher involvement in conferences, publications and inservice work and their significant contribution to our knowledge and ideas about teaching, learning and school organisation.

The question is not intended to be provocative although our response could be described as spirited. The value of teachers generating new knowledge from self-study of their practice has been challenged, or at least queried, as a form of research. The ARC has provided funding for other than a traditional research effort and deserves to be reassured that it has acted in accord with its guidelines. It is not the first time that my interest in self-study (or is it participant observation or reflection on practice?) has been queried. One does not need to participate in the SSTEP (Self Study of Teacher Education Practices) group very long to realise that SIG (Special Interest Group) members are being continually asked to justify their interest in what is currently described as self-study.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the origins of the recent version of self-study and the Special Interest Group. In 1989 in San Francisco a group of new academics described their adjustment to tertiary work and the difficulties and confusion associated with being acknowledged and valued. Rather than reluctantly accept socialization within their new academic positions, they chose to study their situations and try to share their understandings. Their purposes moved beyond fitting into the situation to become effective members of staff. They wished to understand, shape the situation and take action to address issues. In many ways their experience and persistence over several years allows us to make a self-study of this recent version of the self-study movement and try to identify what might count as quality in this form of research. Before exploring the concept of quality in self-study it is necessary to consider the reasons for wide interest in the activities associated with the SSTEP group.

Reasons for interest in self-study

Recent interest seems to be associated with a growing faith in analyzing personal experience among teachers and teacher educators. The recognition of "the authority of experience" (Munby and Russell 1993) has taken different forms but there has been widespread recognition of teacher potential for generating new ideas and knowledge if appropriate conditions can be established (eg Baird and Northfield, 1992). This has had implications for teacher education with teacher educators accepting a responsibility to prepare teachers for a research role at preservice level and supporting teacher activity at the inservice level. Among the SSTEP group are teacher educators who now model self-study by reflecting on their own teaching and even reconsidering their ideas of research. Self-study has meant that much that was "taken for granted" is now "problematic" and the subject of study.

When teacher self-study has been made explicit in writing and at conferences its authenticity has often had an impact rarely achieved with the outcomes of more conventional educational research. The teacher voice is not easy to develop and disseminate but the relevance and complexity of the issues being developed leads to other teacher interest and acceptance. Teacher educators who have been involved with these types of teacher research have seen implications for their own work.

One possible outcome of self-study is a recognition of the range of perspectives and values possessed by the participants in an educational or administrative situation. The new academics who provided the energy and initiative for SSTEP began to see their situations from the perspective of other key players in their academic positions. They may not have agreed with these perspectives but it did lessen the feelings of being individual targets and increased their understanding of the way academic institutions operate.

In my own recent secondary school experience a key realisation in my own self-study of the classroom came with growing awareness of the student perspectives on learning and classroom activities. Their responses started to make sense and contributed significantly to a better understanding and performance as their teacher. In this case the self-study required the participation of two colleagues. Effective self-study may not be possible without collaboration, a point to which I will return later in the paper.

Perhaps the SSTEP group is a forum where people are prepared to make their ideas about research approaches and some of their practices a topic for discussion? Perhaps self-study is a new orthodoxy, attracting people with similar research perspectives which are not yet fully developed?

The search for quality in self-study

The statements in this section are tentatively proposed after an analysis of some of the work which has made a personal impact in the last few years. In keeping with the values of the group, the ideas are presented to promote discussion and contribute to self-study. The statements form an interconnected set of ideas.

Self-study is associated with serious "reframing" of situations

The most significant self-study work appears to have been associated with fundamental shifts in the way the researcher has seen the situation or problem. It is clearly possible to study a situation from a particular perspective and gain evidence to confirm an existing position . However the quality in self-study seems to be linked to a willingness to make aspects of the study problematic. The phrases "living contradiction" (Whitehead, 1993) and "authority of experience" (Munby and Russell, 1993) represent alternative ways of thinking about teacher improvement and teacher knowledge respectively. The self study led to changes in self-beliefs and perspectives as well as a deeper understanding of the situation being studied.

In several studies seeing problems through the eyes of other participants has enabled a new frame to be acknowledged and a more complete understanding to follow. This leads to a further feature of effective self-study – the involvement of others in the self-study process.

Self-study must be a collaborative activity

All levels of the self-study process would seem to benefit from interaction with others. Framing the problems, gathering data, analysing and interpreting the data and communicating findings require collaboration if self-study is to be seen as more than a confirmation of existing views and values. This need to make self-study accessible to others means that those undertaking self-study have to find ways of retaining some of the complexity of the context. The characteristics that make self-study authentic for readers are essential to obtain the collaboration that is needed to achieve the worthwhile outcomes. Ideally, all stages of the self-study can involve collaboration – framing and reframing the problem and sharing the knowledge development process. Self study is a learning process with concerns, issues and ideas requiring checking and testing with colleagues. This is one way to answer the suggestion that self study is too subjective and relativistic and sharing findings and interpretations can be regarded as a responsibility for all who engage in self study.

The outcomes of self-study are effective if they promote dialogue

The collaborative aspects of self-study extend to the way the outcomes are presented and used. Many studies are presented to promote dialogue among interested people. Providing an invitation for further discussion is the purpose for communication, and a challenge in the way a study is presented. Again the complexity of the context must be retained to allow others to participate and relate the study to their own experiences. Ensuing dialogue forms a continuation of the study and may extend it into different settings. The use of electronic mail communication and presenting papers which include colleague responses (eg Loughran and Northfield, 1995) provide possibilities for meeting the communication challenge.

The uses for self-study are meaningful for the person involved

One feature of self-study has been the importance of the area of study for the individual involved. The fundamental issues have demanded attention and study by those involved. Personal outcomes have included feelings of satisfaction in better understanding the problem and in the capacity to deal with further issues. In addition there is a feeling that the new knowledge and the thought and effort in its generation are valued by colleagues, For teachers, being valued in this way is a significant professional development outcome. Their study of their problem area can make a contribution to the wider education community when their experience is communicated.

The personal development of the individual must be highlighted as an important outcome of self-study. The generation of new knowledge is a secondary outcome for someone who has learned a little more about their situation with the support of colleagues.

Commitment to action

One feature of quality in self-study lies in the way in which beliefs are altered and subsequent practices are changed. In some respects you can never be the same again after realizing that a particular situation can be framed differently. This must lead to different responses as one reconsiders the position as a participant. Perhaps those people who are prepared to risk making the routine and accepted problematic are also those who accept the consequences of their study. In studying the outcomes of a group of teachers who had studied their own teaching I formed a generalisation that the teachers often did not want to know what they found; the news was frequently not good. The teachers, while agreeing with this conclusion, showed their clear commitment to action. "It is much better knowing. It is important to have looked into it anyway...perhaps we suspected the outcome...at least we might be able to do something." These teachers had found passive learning as outcomes of their best teaching activities and student coping strategies as a result of their teaching when thinking was expected. But their findings could not be ignored and they sought to alter their teaching approach; some action was inevitable.

Returning to the question "but is this research?"

Self-study is something every teacher and teacher educator should undertake as part of their practice. Teacher education now aspires to prepare teachers for a research role in their classrooms and schools. What the SSTEP group has done has encouraged us to think that this more routine function in our teaching may generate knowledge and ideas for wider use. Self -study then aspires to find a niche among other approaches to generating new knowledge. Perhaps it is connected to more conventional educational research in the way Richardson (1994) outlined.

Establishing a niche in research will depend on the way we support the process and foster the collaboration needed to thoroughly study our situations. It will also depend on the way we present our efforts. The relevance of our studies, the authenticity of our communications and our ability to involve colleagues will be important factors if we are to convince our sceptical colleagues that we can develop knowledge and ideas that are not generalizable in the usual sense. Our readers may still feel the knowledge is useful and contributes to their understanding and the improvement of their practice.

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